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ABSTRACT

This report describes the Better Opportunities for Disadvantaged Hispanics program of the Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC) (Florida). More than 35 percent of Dade County's total population is comprised of Hispanic residents, with many seeking higher education at a community college. The Better Opportunities program was started to respond to and promote the educational success of this student population. The program aims to provide "client-driven" services in an effort to increase students' employability or their chances to complete an associate's degree. The services offered include financial assistance, enrollment in certification courses, remedial and regular college classes, and supportive case management. For the year 2000, 21 students participated in the program. These students were either unemployed, displaced agricultural workers, or individuals lacking English language proficiency. The report highlights the experiences of individual participants in the program. Overall, the program was successful as evidenced by the 75 percent retention rate. The majority of students were able to continue their education, and 35 percent of them were placed in marketable jobs because of training provided by the program. The report concludes with recommendations for future development of the program. (Contains 15 references.) (JCC)

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A Focus on Students: The Better Opportunities for Disadvantaged Hispanics Program of the Miami-Dade Community College

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Edwin Meléndez

Principal Investigator

A Focus on Students: The Better Opportunities for Disadvantaged Hispanics Program of the Miami-Dade Community College

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Summary

One of the greatest challenges of large educational institution, such as community colleges, are how to create a welcoming atmosphere and a student-focused support system for disadvantaged students attending college for the first time - often when they are the first ones in their families to attend college. While it is often difficult for all students to negotiate financial aid, admissions and enrollment, deciding on courses, and other challenges of academic life, they are particularly difficult for disadvantaged students

The Better Opportunities for Disadvantaged Hispanics program of the Dade County Community College, Homestead campus provided "client-driven" services in an effort to increase students' employability or their chances to complete an associate's degree. The program offered financial assistance, enrollment in certification courses, remedial and regular college classes, and supportive case management to 21 students. Students were either unemployed, displaced agricultural workers, or individuals lacking English language proficiency. The goals of the Better Opportunities program were to provide high school dropouts the opportunity to pursue vocational training, develop job skills, and also to facilitate the attainment of higher education.

The program was very successful in providing students with a safe "home" within the larger institution. The retention rate of 75 percent is slightly higher than for traditional students. Thirty five percent of the students were placed on jobs as a result of the program, and the majority was able to continue their education. Further, the program allowed students to pursue career paths in Business Management, Elementary Education, and Airline Ticketing through certifications and college credits. The pro-

gram attributed its success to the individualized case management, which was central to the "client-centered" approach that the program featured. This "client-centered" approach also included ongoing support to the students through counseling and non-traditional workshops in Life and Job skills.

A Focus on Students: The Better Opportunities for Disadvantaged Hispanics Program of the Miami-Dade Community College

Introduction

The Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC) Better Opportunities for Disadvantaged Hispanics of South Dade program was designed to combine traditional educational college courses with non-traditional self-development activities in order to provide participants with a variety of educational resources. The underlying premise of this approach was that by combining course work with non-traditional self-development activities and an individualized support system, students could be better able to confront some of the personal and academic barriers that stand in their way of completing a college degree or job training program. Thus the program incorporated individualized case management and academic counseling follow-ups. It also offered one-on-one and small-group support services.[1] The key to program success was a focus on students' needs in their family, work, and academic life.

Participating students were encouraged to enroll in academic or job training programs at MDCC that offered the highest opportunity for employment in the area, such as associate's degrees in Business Management and Elementary Education, or the 10-credit certification in Airline Ticketing and Reservations. The program also offered English as a Second Language or General Educational Development (GED) classes in cooperation with the South Dade Adult Education Center. By the end of the project it was expected that at least 50 percent of its participants would have acquired new skills measurable in terms of academic persistence, academic success, and employment.

According to the 1990 Census data, the city of Homestead in South Dade County, Florida, where the MDCC's Homestead Campus is located, is the home of approximately 9,510 Hispanics or 35.4 percent of the total population. Agriculture was the primary economic activity of Homestead until Hurricane Andrew destroyed the crop fields in August 1992. A vast majority of the Hispanic population in the city is Mexican American, who migrated to the area to work in the crop fields from other regions of the United States. After hurricane Andrew hit the region the earnings of agricultural workers fell below the poverty level, while the poverty level of the area increase three times that of other parts of the county. Post hurricane reports from the Dade County Farm Bureau indicated that it would take at least five years for the tropical agriculture industry in Homestead to recover. Many agricultural workers were expected to remain unemployed or to hold unstable jobs unless they acquired new skills, and the chances for employment in agriculture were rather scant for young adults wanting to enter the job market.

In addition, South Dade County is home of many individuals with limited English language proficiency. The lack of English language skills stands in their way

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1 Information regarding program goals and objectives taken from program reports sent to DOL.

to permanent or well-remunerated employment, and as a result, they are forced to go from one low-paying job to another. The situation of the linguistically or educationally disadvantaged is compounded by barriers, which are reflective of their cultural background and beliefs, and which are undermined by a traditional educational system. Many Hispanic families who have lived in the United States for a long time or even those born in the United States function in accordance to cultural and socioeconomic values different from mainstream American cultural norms. Mexican Americans, as do many other Hispanic groups, place particular emphasis on the family, choosing to prioritize care giving of the family over education. This perspective validates letting go opportunities for socioeconomic advance if these opportunities jeopardize their values or their ability to spend time with, and care for, their families.[2]

The lack of English language proficiency among the Hispanic population of this area, along with the limited economic resources, has affected the economic stability of families. The recovery of the city following Hurricane Andrew has been hampered by the spread of crime and gang activity causing the decline in the quality of life for everyone. While many programs have attempted to help this population, the need outnumbered the resources, particularly since some of the training programs designed to provide new job skills were funded under constrained timelines. These programs have offered only temporary relief to a few.

Miami-Dade Community College is a publicly supported two-year college that serves the populous metropolitan Dade County community. MDCC, one of 28 colleges in the Florida system of community colleges, has an Open Door admission policy, which provides educational opportunities to all those interested in participating in the college's degree programs, courses, and services. MDCC, which opened in 1960 in temporary quarters with 1,400 students, now enrolls more than 127,000 credit and noncredit students at five major campuses and numerous centers through Dade County. With the transition from a single campus to a multi-campus college, the administrative operation was reorganized to provide services common to the whole college, while at the same time offer maximum autonomy to each campus. The Homestead campus, which opened in September 1990 in the historic downtown business, is the college's newest campus. The construction and habilitation of the campus was divided in several phases, with the first phase completed on an eight-acre site with a 20,000-square-foot building donated to the college by Barnett Bank and the city of Homestead. When completely developed, the campus will have a fine arts facility, library and student information area, a major agricultural center and labs for career preparation. From 1994 to 1997 Hispanics have represented over 30 percent of the student body, and this percentage is expected to climb.[3]

The Better Opportunities for Disadvantaged Hispanics of South Dade program was patterned after the "Step Ahead Development Program," which ran from 1993 until

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2 For a discussion of the cultural values of Latino students see Carter, 1991; Marin and Marin, 1991; and Sanchez, 1992.

3 MDCC Course Catalog 1996-1997.

1995, funded by the Florida Department of Education, the Migrant Farm Worker Service Program, and the Florida Department of Labor. The "Step Ahead" model used a non-traditional approach to education, providing counseling, and focusing on student development. In less that a year, 50 percent of the participants who had scored at the seventh grade level or lower on entrance to the program, were able to acquire skills that helped them in the job market. Over 50 percent of ESOL students passed the GED exam, and some transferred to regular English language vocational programs from which they graduated to new jobs. Many of the English-speaking students recruited after Hurricane Andrew had left them jobless enrolled and completed associate's degrees.

The "Better Opportunities" program in turn proposed to recruit between 40 to 50 students. This number of students were selected based on previous experience that indicated that in order to maintain an effective individualized approach to training and development the number of participants should not exceed more than 55 participants per year. The program also expected that between 25 to 30 economically needy Hispanic students graduating in the 1995-1996 school year from local high schools would be part of the pool of applicants. By September of 1996, when the program began its recruitment efforts by sending flyers to local service providers, and through radio announcements, many of the local high school graduates had gone to work or had made other academic arrangements. Further, high school officials could not assist the program to get in touch with these high school graduates because they are not allowed to release student information due to record privacy policies. As a result there were only 34 inquiries, and only 21 candidates enrolled.

Support Services

The support services offered by the Better Opportunities for Disadvantaged Hispanics of South Dade included a financial aid package, academic support, and personalized case management to students enrolled in the regular MDCC associate's degree or certification programs. The main focus of this approach is enrollment and academic retention.[4] Program director Valeria Solano argues that to serve the unemployed, the school dropout, the dislocated worker, and the welfare client, a program must provide individualized case management, one-on-one academic counseling, small-group activities and orientation, personal self-development courses, and student monitoring. Ms. Solano indicated that the barriers to education experienced by the Hispanic population in Homestead are not only the result of lack of monetary resources, or information regarding ways to obtain financial assistance, but also the confusion created by a bureaucratic educational system. She feels that the traditional school system can not offer individualized services because they have thousand of mainstream students who also need to be served. The program therefore provided early screening of candidates, academic program orientation, informal one-on-one educational assessment

4 For a discussion of strategies designed to improve retention of Latino students see Creason, 1994; Noel, Levitz, and Saluri (1985); and Walker (1988).

and formal group testing, and on going career planning, advisement, and student monitoring. The other non-traditional components of the program included self-development workshops, such as Team Building, Developing Communication Skills, and Employability training. Through these group activities students developed a support network with other students and a sense of belonging in the college.

Financial Aid Packages

One of the features of the Better Opportunities for Disadvantaged Hispanics of South Dade program is their financial aid package.[5] Financial aid eligibility for the program was based on economic need and employability status. Those accepted had their tuition fees paid by the program and, in addition, received assistance for books and other class expenses. The US Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration provided this financial aid package totaling $125,453.

Financial aid enabled most students to attend the program. For Julia Valdez, a married Mexican American student, and mother of 15 children, one of the main motivations to attend college was the program's offer of paid tuition. Ana Bustos, a Guatemalan student and mother of 4 children, was also encouraged to enroll in the program because of the financial aid offered. Ana Bustos had lived in Homestead for the last 9 years, and had been working at the Homestead campus of the MDCC for the last 3 years as a maintenance person. Maria Tarrago, the secretary of the program, encouraged her to apply to the program. She took English courses at the Center for Adult Education, and completed 30 hours for a childcare certificate.

The financial assistance offered by the program not only facilitated the initial enrollment of many students, but also allowed some to continue in the college. That was the case of student Adalia Araujo. By 1996, Adalia Araujo had completed a year in college at MDCC, however she had to withdraw due to financial difficulties. She learned about the Better Opportunities program from Maria Tarrago, the program's secretary, when Maria was taking computer courses at the Adult Education Center. Adalia Araujo is a middle age Cuban woman who came to the United States as a child. She graduated from high school in 1975, and lived in Homestead with her adolescent son. She worked at the South Dade Adult Education Center, where she met Maria Tarrago, staff of the "Better Opportunities" program. Although she still had 2 semesters to complete at the time of this study, the financial aid provided by the program allowed her to return to the college, and helped her to complete one semester towards an associate's degree in Business Administration. The program also assisted her in requesting financial aid to complete the last semesters.

The issue of financing an education was problematic for students enrolled in the program who received financial aid for the year, but didn't qualify for the year following the end of the program. Program Director Valeria Solano indicated that the

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5 For a discussion of the role of financial support to improve the retention of Latino students see Field (1988).

program tried to help students fill out financial aid forms, and was encouraged by the belief that most would receive assistance. Students, however, experience the uncertainty regarding funding for their education as extremely distressing. Student Marcia Bairena expressed concern for her academic future because she feared she would not have the money to continue attending college. Marcia is a married Mexican American woman. Before Hurricane Andrew hit the area she worked as a farm worker. She had been interested in pursuing further studies after graduating from high school but was discouraged from so doing first by her family and later by her husband. She initially approached the college, but given her background and limited resources, the Admissions Office referred her to the program. She completed the year-long program and was working part-time at a chiropractor's office. Although she now has the support of her husband, to complete her associate's degree she still needed financial assistance.

Academic Support and Advice

One of the most important features of the Better Opportunities program was its emphasis on "client-driven" individualized case management. This approach is founded on the belief, articulated by Director Valeria Solano, that the multiple barriers to education experienced by students in the program can only be confronted by responding to the individual needs of each participant. As a result, the program endeavored to offer, in addition to a traditional curriculum, a series of non-traditional workshops, self-development courses, and student monitoring.

The program planners chose the traditional curriculum of academic tracks with the highest job opportunities in the Dade County areas. These programs included an associate's degree in Business Management, an associate's in arts in Elementary Education, and a 10 college-credit certificate program in Airline Reservations and Ticketing. For students without a high school diploma, the program offered cooperative courses at the South Dade Adult Education Center, located within walking distance from the college, in English as a Second Language (ESOL), Adult Basic Education (ABE), and General Educational Development (GED). The South Dade Adult Education Center has a Homestead campus located on 8th Street, adjacent to MDCC. That institution offers a variety of program that include:[6]

- High School completion classes for credits such as Business Math, Algebra, Geometry, Spanish, Drivers Ed, Computers, English, ESOL, Biology, Physical Sciences, and Auto Tech.
- Vocational classes including Word Processing, Auto Tech, Childcare, and Electric Tech.
- Adult Basic Education courses such as ESOL and GED Prep courses free of cost. For the paid course such as Business Math, and Conversational Spanish, the cost for a month-long class during the 1997-1998 period was $ 57.

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6 South Dade Adult Education Center class schedule 1997-1998.

- Community interest classes. These include Ceramic, Drawing, Flower Arrangement and Fruit Tree Propagation, the cost of each class ranging from $ 20 to $ 55.

Clearly this institution offers many of the courses needed by the students targeted by the Better Opportunities program, making the collaboration between the two institutions a logical development. The Adult Education Center provides services to students with limited English proficiency or without a high school diploma, while the Better Opportunities program offered these students bilingual childcare training leading to a certificate in HRS Childcare. The day-care classes are non-credit, but they lead to a CDA license (Child Development Associate). With a CDA license a student is eligible for employment in public elementary schools as a teacher assistant. Students with a CDA license qualify to take the GED and eventually an Associate's degree in Elementary Education.

Clarisa Jones, because of her English language limitations, took courses in the bilingual Certificate of Education (CED) component of the program. Clarisa Jones was a middle-aged Cuban woman, mother of a young daughter, and a recent immigrant to this country. A classmate at the South Dade Adult Education Center, where she was studying English, referred her to the program. Although she had a Bachelor's degree in Sociology (Licenciada) from the University of Havana, in Cuba, she felt that she needed to confront two essential problems. First, she wanted to improve her English-language skills in order to look for employment more in line with her professional skills. At the same time she needed training in an area that would allow her to get a job quickly. Program Director Valeria Solano felt that, given Clarisa's particular circumstance, the child care training, offered as part of the CED component of the program, was her best choice. While other options may have been open to a person with Clarisa's experience and skills, it is difficult to assess, in a short time, how easily an individual's skills can be adapted to a different context and locale.

Student Ana Bustos, also had been taking English courses at the Center for Adult Education, and had completed 30 hours out of the 40 required by the childcare component of the program. Ana Bustos is a Guatemalan woman, mother of 4 children, who works as a maintenance person at the Homestead campus. Previously she had worked in a plant nursery, but had to leave the job to take care of her children. When she began the program however, the two oldest were in school, and the two youngest attended a day care-pre-school. Since Ana wanted to work in a day care center if she were to lose the job she had held, Program Director Valeria Solano advised her to enrolled in the childcare program.

The non-traditional workshops offered by the program dealt with topics not usually covered in a regular curriculum. The topics of the one- or two-day workshops included self-awareness, self-directness, career motivation, team building, communication skills, and problem solving. Students were also given the opportunity to read material related to personal life skills. A set of self-development books, videos, and articles were distributed among the students, on topics that included parenting skills, goal setting, financial planning, balancing home and career, nutrition, and personal relationships. Student Julia Valdez identified the main impact of the program at the

level of self-development, which, she felt led to empowerment. In this context she credited the life skills training, and in particular the Time Management workshop, for allowing her to discover new ways to use her time wisely. As a result, she was able to spend more time with her kids, take classes, and even run for office. Julia Valdez, a married Mexican American student and mother of 15 children, had recently been elected to the student government as part of a ticket of Latina candidates. The then president-elect Jenny de la Rosa asked Julia to participate in the slate. The program, she reported, gave her the encouragement to participate in extra curricular activities, and to take up challenges beyond the purely academic.

Student Adalia Araujo concurred with this view of non-traditional instruction. She felt that the Employability workshops offered by the program were very useful in learning skills such as résumé writing. She also credited the workshops with preparing her to help her 18-year old son, who was in High School, but applying for college. The program also offered assistance finding tutors, and remedial sessions. Adalia Araujo expressed satisfaction with the help that she received from program staff in finding tutors, as well as getting books from instructors.

Lastly, the program provided career plans designs for each student. The director of the program, Professor Valeria Solano, worked with each student to design these plans. If there were additional needs that the program could not provide directly, the program referred participants to other resources on campus. For instance, the program relied on the services of other academic advisers, in addition of those of director Valeria Solano. The director conducted monthly follow-up meetings with each student to discuss individual goals and objectives. The meetings were used as a retention strategy, as well as a means for the director to remain informed about different developments in students' life. Further, students were encouraged to drop by the program's office. One shortcoming of this strategy had to do with the reduced quarters of the program held within a larger office shared by staff from other services. Director Valeria Solano indicated that there was a certain lack of understanding in the part of neighboring staff regarding the students' need for the services that the program provided. According to Ms. Solano, staff working close to the program's small section often complained about the number of students who came by the office to converse with the program staff or each other.

Another difficulty the program confronted was the recruiting of faculty trained to work with disadvantaged students. According to program director, Valeria Solano, selecting faculty for the program was challenging because not all instructors had the sensitivity necessary for the job.[7] This later issue was relevant because the program didn't have permanent teaching staff. The university supported the program by assigning faculty and services, while program staff was paid from the grant. According to the program director, the level of interest and teaching approach used by the instruc-

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7 For a discussion of the role of faculty involvement in students' retention see James, 1991; and National Council of La Raza, 1989.

tors affected students' performance. For example students in the Accounting class, a requirement of the Business Administration program, performed poorly with one instructor, but their performance improvement considerably with a more sympathetic instructor. Director Valeria Solano requested that the Accounting class be taught by Professor Mark Pierce, who had worked for the "Step Ahead" program, but he wasn't available, and the college administration assigned Professor Etienne instead. When students began having difficulties keeping up with the Accounting class taught by Professor Etienne, Ms. Solano asked Professor Pierce to help out by conducting the lab session. Professor Pierce used the lab sessions as informal tutorial meetings. The relative slow progress of students made it necessary for them to withdraw from Professor Etienne's class. Professor Pierce taught Accounting during the following sessions, and the performance of the students improved dramatically.

Students Nora Rivaldo and Juana Lopez encountered difficulties in the Accounting class taught by Professor Etienne. Nora Rivaldo and Juana Lopez, both Mexican-American, were unsure about what academic path or career to follow but were good at math and interested in a career in businesses. Nora Rivaldo, who had been studying math and psychology at MDCC, learned about the "Better Opportunities" program from her father, who found the ad in a local paper. Juana Lopez learned about the program from another student at the time she was registering at MDCC for her first semester. Program Director Valeria Solano advised them to enroll in the Business program, and they took introduction to Business Administration with Professor Edward Iglesias. They described the Accounting class taught by Professor Etienne as difficult, however they both performed well in the class taught by Professor Pierce. They also found the motivation and encouragement to take a higher level accounting class, in which they also did fairly well.

Professor Pierce's approach is grounded on a combination of skills gained through experience and by his willingness to try new approaches depending on the circumstance. Professor Pierce was born in Miami, and has taught Accounting for nearly 30 years. He works exclusively as an instructor at Miami Dade Community College. According to Professor Pierce, he mostly tries to demystify the field by relying on examples related to the everyday experience of the students. By so doing, he makes the material accessible and manageable. As a result, students who initially had difficulty with the subject found his approach more accessible, did well in class, and found the motivation to take more advanced accounting classes. Professor Pierce underscored the value of having fun, both for the students and the instructor. Clearly, Professor Pierce seems to enjoy teaching and he conveys his interest in the subject and in his students. His strategy of demystifying the material by using everyday examples proved to be extremely valuable in this context. Professor Pierce experience should encourage programs geared to underprivileged populations to make demystification of learning material and the use of relevant every day examples part of their teaching practice.

Program director Valeria Solano values the work of Professor Pierce because of his ability to clearly communicate the material and because of his sensitivity towards the students. Interviews with students validated this view. Students valued Professor Pierce's ability to answer questions and discuss the material thoroughly. In fact, Pro-

fessor Pierce claimed he does not get upset if a student doesn't understand the material, and does not feel that repeating lesson is an imposition. He is always available for questions, and can tutor students, as groups or individually if needed. Student Vicky Figueroa, for instance, described Professor Pierce's helpful attitude during her difficult pregnancy. Due to complications with her pregnancy, she required bed rest for extended periods of time, which interfered with her ability to attend classes. Professor Pierce prepared extensive homework for her so she could keep up with the class and pass the semester, which she did. While a program gear to underprivileged populations could not necessarily demand or expect this level of dedication and commitment, it is clear that at a minimum instructors need to adapt teaching practices and styles to the needs of the students. In the accounting class taught by Professor Pierce that meant extended discussions, material presented in a down-to-earth fashion, and a certain measure of sensitivity to students' personal circumstances.

Support to Students' Personal/Life Issues

During the first session of the Better Opportunities program, which started on January 6, 1997, the group of 18 students experienced the first dropouts. Two students, Julia Sosa and Esmeralda Malaga, were dropped from the Airline Certificate program due to absenteeism. Two students enrolled in the ESOL classes at the South Dade Adult Education Center also left the program. These two students Maria Echegaray and Carmen Linares found jobs and left the program in order to work. During the last session student Doris Duarte left the program. According to Program Director Valeria Solano, many of the students have, in addition to academic deficiencies, personal problems and personal responsibilities that interfere with their performance in the classroom. Often, students are absent because of family demands. Individuals that come from disadvantaged Hispanic families in this geographical area are used to working for their daily survival. In spite of their growing awareness of the significance of education in achieving a better standard of living, many don't hesitate to drop out of the program to take a temporary job. In order to assist students shift their priorities, director Valeria Solano argued that the program staff needed to schedule regular meetings with the students in order to encourage and support students to hold their interest and maintain their commitment to their training. As part of the program design, then, director Solano meets at least once a month with each student to monitor students' academic progress and discuss changing personal circumstances in students' life. Students were also encouraged to drop by the office any time of the day. Either the director or the program secretary was usually available to interact with the students.

The situation can be complex because Mexican Americans, as do many other Hispanics, value the support of the family, and they respect the opinions of elders.[8] Student Marcia Bairena, for instance, related her interest in pursuing further studies

8 For a discussion of the hierarchical nature of relationships in Latino families see Sue and Sue, 1990.

after graduating from high school, but she was dissuaded from doing so first by her family and later by her husband. Marcia Bairena is a Mexican American woman who, until Hurricane Andrew hit the area, worked in the fields as a farm worker picking lettuces and other crops. After Hurricane Andrew destroyed a large part of the crops it became very hard to find work in agriculture, and the work that she could find was hard and wages were very low. At this point Marcia approached the college, and given her background and limited resources, she was referred to the Better Opportunities program. She enrolled in the Business Administration program and successfully completed business math and computer courses along with the study and employability skills classes. With the help of the Better Opportunities program she also found part-time employment as on office assistant at the Perez Chiropractic Health Center. The chiropractic office is a small outfit and doesn't have enough clientele to justify a full-time position. At the time of our interview Marcia Bairena acknowledged a change of perspective in her family, with her husband supporting her wishes to continue taking college courses and get an associate's degree.[9]

The Better Opportunities program also offered self-development and life-skills workshops to help students develop different ways of confronting personal problems. Beginning in March 1996 the program offered workshops in Personal Relationships, Coping with Difficult People, Balancing Home and Career, Goal Setting, Parenting Skills, and the Role of Attitude in Success. The program also made available books, videos, and articles on several different personal topics. Students were encouraged to borrow and use these materials for personal and academic purposes. Student Vicky Figueroa praised the non-traditional workshops offered by the program, because by attending them she learned to confront conflicts she had with her father-in-law. Vicky described her father-in-law as an old-fashion man who expected her to behave according to his ideal of traditional roles. He feels that she is not the right person for his son and finds fault with her. Vicky Figueroa was born in Miami, from Mexican parents who migrated to the Homestead area from Texas. She is married, has one daughter, and at the time of our conversation she was six months pregnant. She started working when she was in middle school, which she left to go to work. Her sister-in-law, who is also a participant, referred her to the Better Opportunities program. Although she took business classes, she would like to work in real estate.

Structural Changes at the University Level

The Better Opportunities program featured a series of courses that lead to certifications in aviation services or in elementary education that also counts towards associate's degrees in Business Administration or Elementary Education. The classes offered to earn certifications and traditional courses leading to associate's degrees, along with the non-traditional workshops in life skills, and individual case management formed

9 For a discussion of the effect of gender roles in the educational attainment of Mexican Americans see Comas-Diaz, 1992.

the essence of the program. This structure is founded on the program's philosophy articulated by Program Director Valeria Solano, who argued that disadvantaged Hispanics can succeed within the traditional system if the traditional system is combined with other non-traditional approaches to training and development. She remarked that this model has caught the attention of theOffice of Migrant Farm Workers Services in the State of Florida. That office is contemplating the idea of adopting the successful practices of this model so that other programs serving disadvantaged adults under their jurisdiction in Dade County can increase their effectiveness. This model already had an effect in the college. Director Valeria Solano informed us that the remedial lab instruction within the college was planning to adopt the individualized case management approach. She underscored the importance of integrating support from the academic environment within the students' cultural context.

Curricular Changes

The 21 students who completed the Better Opportunities program received from 20 to 28 credits towards an associate's degree, about one-third to one half of the total credits required to earn an associate's degree. To receive an associate's degree, students must complete 60 credits. Not counting remedial courses students in the program earned approximately 16 credits towards an associate's in Business or Education, plus about 10 credits towards a certificate program in Aviation, Horticulture, Child Care or Child Development, and Office Management. The program articulated a series of certifications that prepared students for different jobs within the aviation service industry or in elementary education. In the first case, a 10 credit Aviation certification allows students to work as ticket vendors or reservation officers. These 10 credits can be carried over into an Aviation Management Program, also offered at MDCC, which consists of a 3 credit Aviation management class, and a 1-credit internship. All these credits can be counted towards an Aviation Associate's degree.[10] During the first session 3 students took the 10 college-credit certificate program in Airline Reservations and Ticketing. Some of the courses student took to receive this certificate included Aviation ticketing, a practice lab, Customer Service Agent, Airline Reservations, and Employability Skills.

The courses leading to the Aviation certifications were developed by the Aviation Industry. The SABRE system, which is nationally standardized, guarantees that graduates will be qualified for employment in the Aviation Industry anywhere in the nation. In 1994, MDCC received a $10.7 million Department of Defense grant for the aviation program. The college spent half of this on equipment, but the rest was reserved for construction of facilities during the next phase of college expansion. MDCC also received a 1.4 million economic development grant. MDCC earmarked this grant for the new facility. In addition, in November 1997 *The Miami Herald* reported that Congress extended MDCC's deadline for spending $6.9 million in federal funds

10 MDCC Travel and Tourism Management. Information Pamphlet 1997.

awarded to help shore up South Dade's economy after the 1993 scale-back of the Homestead Air Force Base. A key element of the city's economic redevelopment plan is the specialized MDCC Aviation training program to lure airline operations like reservations centers and accounting centers to the area. The Federal Aviation Administration has approved an air-traffic controller training school at MDCC. Since Hurricane Andrew demolished the aviation program's old South Dade facilities, the program has been split between Miami International Airport (MIA) and the Homestead campus. At MIA, however, the program is limited to 100 students a year, while at Homestead it will be able to expand to 300 (*The Herald*, 1997).

Similarly, courses in child care, offered by the Better Opportunities program are articulated with certifications for a Child Development License which allows students to work as Teacher's Assistant at the Public School level while they develop the skills necessary to pass GED requirements. Students with a CDA license qualify to take GED and eventually pursue an Associate's degree in Elementary Education. Five students took ESOL classes at the South Dade Adult Education Center, and two ESOL students also enrolled in the bilingual childcare certificate program. These students also took the Employability Skills class in Spanish from director Valeria Solano. Students enrolled in the regular associate's in arts degree program in Elementary Education received 12 credits by taking English Composition, Humanities, Psychology, and Employability Skills.[11]

During the first session, 8 students enrolled in the Business Administration program and a total of 17 students pursued a Business Administration degree. Those enrolled in the associate's degree in Business Management received 11 credits by taking Financial Accounting, Intro to Computers, and Employability Skills. Graduates of this program were in demand by employers in the area. Students could enroll in the degree program and also take courses toward earning a certification.[12]

All students enrolled in Employability Skills classes. These classes focused on résumé and cover and follow-up letter writing, and interview skills. Director Valeria Solano informed us that in the future, given their experience with the Better Opportunities program, and depending on need, the college might offer programs combining Vocational and English as a Second Language Instruction (VESL).

Administrative Changes

Dr. Stan Nelson, president of MDCC Homestead, underscored the significance of the campus for the Latino population in the area, remarking that its location and services make college education accessible and available to Latinos in Homestead. Dr. Stan Nelson, an African American educator, is also involved with a number of community organizations. He learned about the Latino community in Homestead through his role

11 MDCC Elementary Teaching - Associate in Arts. Information Pamphlet 1997.
12 MDCC Accounting Applications - Associate in Science. Information Pamphlet 1997.

as director of a college with a large Latino population, and through his involvement in the board of CORFO, a farm workers' organization. Although the Better Opportunities program features both individual case management and job-specific certifications, Dr. Nelson, emphasized primarily the role of individualized case management.

Dr. Nelson argued that because of the particular needs of the Hispanic population, it was necessary to implement a more individualized approach. He declared his intention to expand this approach to other programs in the college reasoning that in his experience welfare clients, migrant workers, and many of the college's Hispanic students needed strong support networks. He felt that in particular there was a need to re-structure the support offered to Hispanic students, by taking in consideration the responsibilities that students fulfill in the life of their family. He also felt that there was a need to re-structure academic instruction. Dr. Nelson recognized that since many prospective students lacked a high school education there was a need to develop both a center for adult training and a department of work force development within the university. Until the college sets up an adult training center for students without a high school diploma, those services will be provided by the South Dade Adult Education Center, located within walking distance from the college. The South Dade Adult Education Center already offers high school completion classes, vocational courses, and adult basic education programs such as ESOL and GED Prep courses free of cost. According to Dr. Nelson, the college could offer an adult education program that is significantly different if the services included job development through targeted certification instruction integrated into college instruction that would lead toward an associate's degree, job placement, and case management. He concluded that all these services were sorely needed.

In addition, Hispanic students were also confronting another shortcomings of the South Dade Community College, although not necessarily of the Better Opportunities program. While the community college hopes to serve the large Latino population, at the time of our visit the admissions office was unable to provide information, lacked a catalog, and the staff presented an overall unfriendly attitude. Unfortunately, we can easily imagine the effect of this attitude on prospective Hispanic students, particularly those with limited English skills, low incomes, low self-esteem, and an apprehension about an unfamiliar institution. At best, the community college projected a distant cold attitude, and at worst the institution position itself in an adversarial relation to the students by putting more obstacles students need to surmount in order to obtain a college education.

Use of New Academic and Evaluation Approaches

The Better Opportunities program was structured to maximize its individualized case management approach. Director Valeria Solano met regularly with all the students in the program, conducted some of the workshop in Spanish, evaluated students' performance, and acted as overall students' advocate. The program, however, didn't have permanent teaching staff, and depended on the college for academic support, faculty, and services. According to the director, selecting faculty for the program was challenging because not all of the instructors had the sensitivity necessary to deal with the students in the program. Dr. Nelson, echoing some of director Valeria Solano's

concern, felt that there was a need to re-structure and revamp academic instruction. These comments underscore the significance of appropriate teaching when designing programs for adult or disadvantaged students.

There were, nevertheless, a number of outstanding instructors amongst the faculty. Director Valeria Solano was particularly impressed with Accounting professor Mark Pierce. Professor Pierce taught some classes for the Step Ahead program, a program that predated the Better Opportunities program, and taught the make-up Accounting class after an entire group withdrew because of difficulties understanding the material. His teaching approach was so successful that even students who initially had difficulty with the subject became motivated to take the second level course, Accounting II.

Program Director, Valeria Solano, credits these results to Professor Pierce's ability to communicate the material and to his sensitivity towards the students in the program. Professor Pierce's successful approach seems the result of his 20 years experience as an accounting instructor combined with his willingness to try new approaches depending on the circumstance. In addition, he also tries to create a supportive atmosphere in the classroom that allows students to perform comfortably. For instance, student Nora Rivaldo mentioned that Professor Pierce let students eat their lunch in class and that he loved the bean dip that she brought. Professor Pierce told the story differently. He told this group of students that they could bring food to class and that they could share it as potluck, because of the association of food to family and group belonging. When he noticed that other students weren't taking the bean dip that Nora Rivaldo brought to class, as a small gesture of empathy, he ate a small portion of the dip and raved about it. As it is, students value Professor Pierce's ability to answer questions and to discuss material thoroughly until he is certain that all the students understand the topic. His connection with the students was manifested in different ways. In some cases he provided special homework for those unable to attend classes, and in other cases by eating a student's bean dip.

There are then several elements that make Professor Pierce stand out:

- His 30 years of experience teaching accounting
- His willingness to try new approaches
- His openness to the variable factors that affect students' performance
- His ability to respond to the needs of students

Professor Pierce responds humbly about his reputation, declaring that after 30 years of teaching he still enjoys his work, and that he gets discouraged when he sees the lack of enthusiasm amongst his colleagues. Professor Pierce argued that instructors needed to learn to appreciate the joy of teaching, and should be willing to try new approaches. While it is difficult to ascertain the different ways that teachers' attitudes and morale affect their participation in the program, it is also possible that the changing demographics in the college's population represents a challenge to the faculty. We are left to wonder what would be the impact of developing a methodology and a professional development program designed to improve the skills of instructors teaching adult or underprivileged students. In the case of Professor Pierce, for instance, it is difficult to determine what elements allow him to connect with his students or to

make the material much more accessible than other faculty. It is possible that it is just the combination of his teaching experience coupled with a certain measure of empathy towards his students that make Professor Pierce stand out amongst his colleagues.

Links Between University and Industry

The Better Opportunities programs offered as part of their non-traditional instructional package a series of Employability Skills workshops. Instruction included discussions aimed to identify employment barriers as well as ways of addressing barriers, identifying individuals' strengths and skills, and job search strategies, interview techniques, resume writing, and dressing for interviews. The workshops were offered both in Spanish and English and ran from January 1997 to April 1997. Director Valeria Solano acknowledged, however, that the program was not well connected with possible employers and that those connections that did exist were rather weak. She explained that this situation was partially the result of the dislocation of businesses resulting from Hurricane Andrew in 1992, which forced many businesses to move out of the area. In spite of many efforts to shore up the South Dade economy, there were still many more better paying jobs in the Miami area, where wages tend to be $1 more an hour for the same job.

One of the key elements of the city's economic redevelopment plan is an air-traffic controller training school at MDCC and approved by the Federal Aviation Administration. When the program becomes fully operational at the Homestead campus it could train over 300 controllers per year. The FAA currently employs about 17,000 controllers and plans to hire 800 more during the next fiscal year.

In the meantime, however, program director Valeria Solano felt that the college needed to focus its energies by developing a placement center. Dr. Nelson, president of MDCC, recognized the need to develop both a center for adult training and a department of work force development. He also noted the importance of developing and maintaining close relations with employers in the community.

Outcome

The services offered by the Better Opportunities program were designed primarily to increase the employability or educational attainment levels of unemployed, dislocated Hispanic farm workers, and high school drop-outs in Homestead, Florida. The program enrolled 21 students in Business Administration, Education, Airline Ticketing, and English as a Second Language instruction, which provided from 20 to 28 college credits toward an associate's degree.

Graduation rate

The Better Opportunities program enrolled 23 students in several departments. Ten students enrolled in the associate's degree in Business Management, 5 students enrolled in the associate's in arts in Elementary Education; 3 students took the 10 college-credit certificate program in Airline Reservations and Ticketing; 5 students took ESOL classes at the South Dade Adult Education Center, and 2 enrolled in the bilingual childcare certificate program. Overall the program had a 70 percent retention rate, however

Business Administration and Elementary Education candidates performed on average better than students enrolled in other departments, with the ESOL and certification students experiencing the highest dropout rate.

At the end of the year the retention rate for students enrolled in the associate's degree in Business Administration was 80 percent with only two students dropping out. Carmen Llerenas withdrew during the spring semester because of an emergency family situation, and Doris Duarte had to withdraw to take care of her young child. The five students enrolled in the Elementary Education section remained in the program until the end of the first year. Three students enrolled in the Airline Reservation and Ticketing certification but only one, Julia Valdez, completed all the requirements and received a certificate. Julia Sosa and Esmeralda Malaga were dropped from the program due to excessive absences. The retention rate then for the Airline certification program is only 34 percent. Similarly, although five students enrolled in the ESOL classes offered at the South Dade Adult Education Center, only two, Lidia Garcia and Clarisa Jones, completed the program, rendering a 40 percent retention rate for this group. Maria Echegaray, Carmen Linares, and Eleonor Miranda withdrew before completing the program. Carmen Linares returned to school for the HRS certificate program, but attended ESOL classes on a part-time basis.

According to Program Director Valeria Solano, many of the students came to the program with serious academic deficiencies based on the entrance exam. She felt that depending on each case, it may take students between 6 to 9 months of remedial reading, writing, and math courses, in addition to the regular career curriculum, to overcome those deficiencies. Students also face additional barriers to education and employment that, based on the experience with other program of this nature, require ongoing support through their academic career. While we learned that two students withdrew from the Business Administration program because of pressing family responsibilities, there was no information regarding the reasons why participants withdrew from the Aviation certifications and ESOL classes. The group receiving ESOL instruction did so at the South Dade Adult Education Center located outside MDCC and only came to the campus to meet with the program director. This situation reduced their involvement with other students in the program, limited their access to services provided on campus, and hampered their ability to develop a sense of group belonging. On the other hand, the group enrolled in the Business Administration program took most classes together, interacted on campus at different levels, and had regular access to school counselors. Also, in addition to support services provided by Program Director Valeria Solano, through consciousness-raising efforts of program staff they received more attention from the college as a group.

It is also important to recall that the program had aimed to recruit a significant number of recent high school graduates from local high schools, but was unable to do so as a result of miscommunications and limited outreach efforts. It is possible then that the program could have been more successful providing services to that group of students, conceivably a group with fewer family demands, more recent academic experience, and a higher level of English-language proficiency.

Employment Rate and Relation to Employers

The Better Opportunities programs offered, from January to April 1997, a series of Employability Skills workshops. These workshops prepared students, particularly those who had completed certifications, to search for jobs, write resumes, and dress appropriately for interviews. The workshops also included interview strategies, and lessons in writing follow up letters after an interview. The program encouraged participants to emphasize their newly acquired skills in the process of searching for jobs. Student Marcia Bairena, who was enrolled in the Business Administration program found a part-time job at the Perez Chiropractic Health Center. Maria credits the program, and program director Valeria Solano in particular, for giving her the encouragement to apply for the office assistant job at the chiropractic office, and the confidence to perform well. Student Juana Lopez, who at the time of our interviews worked at MDCC in the Records and File office, described similar levels of support and encouragement. Both students were pursuing associate's degrees in Business Administration and working while attending college.

Seven students out of a total of 21 obtained jobs as a result of their participation in the Better Opportunities program. Those figures represent an employment rate of 35 percent. Two students worked as administrative assistants, one as a teacher assistant and one as a teacher aid, one as a phone operator, one as a receptionist, and one student worked on campus as Student Service Assistant. Students' salaries ranged from $5.15 to $7.00 an hour. Generally, wages in the area of Homestead tend to be about one dollar less than in the city of Miami. While the relatively low employment rate of program participants may reflect the overall difficulties in finding employment in an area devastated by a natural disaster, it also underscores the need of the college to develop a more aggressive job referral and placement service for the students. Program director Valeria Solano noted that the connection of the program with possible employers was rather weak, partly as a result of the dislocation to businesses caused by Hurricane Andrew. She felt, nevertheless, that the college should develop more contact with industries, internships, and a job placement center. Dr. Nelson, president of the college, concurs with this view, noting the need to develop both a center for adult training and a department of work force development within the college. However it is encouraging that the majority of those students who found jobs as a result of their training continued to pursue associate's degrees at the college.

The future bodes well for students who continue to pursue A. A. degrees, since the college is well positioned to take advantage of federal programs aiming to improve the economic conditions in the Homestead area. The Federal Aviation Administration has approved an air-traffic controller training school at MDCC. In addition to the $10.7 million Department of Defense grant that MDCC received in 1994 for the aviation program, according to the October 8, 1997 issue of *The Miami Herald*, MDCC was one of nine colleges picked to train traffic controllers. The Federal Aviation Administration will add these nine colleges to the four that are already part of its collegiate training initiative. Selected schools will receive FAA guidance to expand their curriculum in air traffic control so that their graduates will meet federal standards for employment as controllers.

Conclusion

At the end of the year it was clear that the Better Opportunities for Hispanics program played a significant role in the lives of its participants. For some it represented a chance to attend college due to the program's financial support as well as the academic support and encouragement from the small group of committed MDCC professionals. Director Valeria Solano was not only the coordinator and director of the program, but she was also a strong student advocate, providing encouragement, orientation, and speaking out for the students to make their voices and concerns heard by the administration. Program Director Valeria Solano exhibited the commitment and cultural sensitivity to help students negotiate personal barriers and academic demands. In her advocate role she also tried to educate her colleagues about the strengths and needs of Hispanic students. Many students found this level of support and commitment invaluable and expressed their gratitude in words and writing in support of the program to the college president.

Beyond the personal achievements, several insights, successes of the program, and a few failures can be gleaned from the Better Opportunities program:

- The retention rates of the program indicate that students enrolled in the associate's degree programs performed and remained in the program at much higher rates than those in the Ticketing and ESOL classes. It is possible that students in the associate's degree courses had more education, were more committed to their career choices, or had more tangible goals to focus on, while students in Ticketing or ESOL were not as committed or did not have those tangible goals. It also may be possible that students in the Ticketing and ESOL program faced were many more family demands or some other barriers to their educational attainment.
- The program integrated in a compelling manner a series of certification programs leading to associate degrees in Aviation Administration and Elementary Education. Unfortunately, low enrollment and low retention rates undermined the possible impact of the program's design.
- Poor connection between the college and prospective employers may be part of the reasons why only 35 percent students in the program obtained employment as a result of their new training. These numbers may also reflect the difficulties in finding employment in an area devastated by natural disaster, as well as the need for the college to develop a more aggressive job referral and placement service. Both, the president of the college and the program director were aware of this need.
- While the original proposal aimed to recruit approximately 40 to 50 students, the program for a number of reasons ultimately recruited about half those numbers.
- Students who participated and completed the year-long program, achieved a personal success, which translated, as well, into an institutional success.

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